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Abstract

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Keywords

Muslim Women in Higher Education, Religious Identity, Gender and Sexuality, Campus Climate and Social Structure, Orientalism and Minority Identity

Cover Page Footnote

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In *Muslim American Women on Campus*, Shabana Mir illuminates the ways that collegiate Muslim women on two university campuses navigate the complexities of campus culture and social interaction. Her research, grounded in anthropology and conducted primarily in the years 2002 and 2003, highlights how the intersections of religion/religiosity, gender, sexuality, age, ethnic and national origin, and educational status distinctly shape these undergraduate students' experiences and means of navigating the social world of university life. Mir's emphasis on the women's stories throughout the text contributes demonstrably to the growing and critically needed body of scholarship on Muslims in America, and focuses on the formative period of undergraduate education in the lives of American Muslim young women. *Muslim American Women on Campus* draws new attention to the importance of adequately addressing religion and its influence on daily practices in the university setting, especially the social world outside the classroom. It is a key resource both for scholars of religious and gendered identities and for university educators and administrators seeking to more thoroughly understand and incorporate Muslim perspectives and needs.

The stories and experiences presented in *Muslim American Women on Campus* are drawn from Mir's interviews with and observations of 26 Muslim undergraduate women at Georgetown University and The George Washington University. Mir structures the three topical sections of the book around the subjects that her research participants brought up most frequently and most saliently: alcohol, dress, and dating. The book primarily focuses on undergraduate life outside the classroom, though participants' relevant classroom experiences are addressed where needed. This focus on the social world of campus life illustrates the many ways that college experiences socialize and affect American Muslim women, and locates Mir's analysis in the ways these women cope, assert their identities, and grow into adult Muslims. She finds that her research participants experience a double scrutiny – both from within their

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own community and from the dominant majority community – but that they have been able to create third spaces and develop individual identities despite these competing pressures.

Mir situates her research findings in the critiques of Orientalism and essentialism, two methods of reinforcing difference and otherness in the construction of a (usually minority) group identity. She concludes that the racist Orientalist stereotyping and the damage to Muslim identity evident in her data are enduring features of both American culture and higher education and did not arise in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks. Mir also identifies the intersections of Orientalism and gender, both in terms of the sexist portrayals of Muslims from outside the community and also in how Muslims themselves may reinforce double standards and inequity in relation to gender and sexuality. The interactions between America and Islam as conceptual frames, and Americans and Muslims as the lived embodiments of these symbolic terms, further guide and shape Mir's analysis. She notes that the construction of "Islam" as a monolithic, defining concept and "America" as a default identity determinant affect categorization of the interviewees. The American Muslim women depicted in the book were categorized in essentialized ways before they could define themselves. Their identity work was thus largely reactive, and the women endeavored to construct their identities, behaviors, and places in campus culture independently. While some students sought to blend in, or to cover or hide their Muslim identities, for others being Muslim was a desirable marker of difference and religiosity.

Of Mir's 26 research participants, a significant majority were residential students, with six of the 26 living at home and commuting to campus for classes. *Muslim American Women on Campus* thus focuses primarily on how young adults navigate the influential period of their first experience living away from home, and the complex pressures of different peer groups and interactions. The women interviewed in the book were primarily of South Asian and Arab descent, although the sample included one Somali woman, an American Black convert, and Caucasian and Latina converts. Although almost all of the participants were middle class in some form, the South Asian students were the most socioeconomically advantaged. The students' senses of belonging on campus, both within the Muslim community and in the majority community, were shaped and affected by their socioeconomic class status, the visibility of their Muslim identity, and their dress and comportment. Mir describes the student population at Georgetown University as more bohemian, more insular, and youth-centric; the students at The George Washington University were less bohemian, more urban, and seemed more worldly by comparison.

The women differed in the levels and visibility of their religiosity both in terms of dress and behavior, with some students wearing *hijab* (the veil/headscarf) and/or modest dress, some drinking and some avoiding alcohol, and some dating or interacting with male friends, while others abstained from significant contact with men. Furthermore, some of the women were heavily involved with the Muslim Student Association (MSA) on campus, while others had never heard of the organization or did not participate in it. Mir's research population demonstrates the diversity of young Muslim women's beliefs and practices. She gives equal weight and objectivity to the variety of Muslim experiences presented by her interviewees; balancing this diversity with the expectations of normative Islamic practice many women encountered and/or enacted is a delicate act. The Muslim women's efforts to achieve normality, and the state of being "differently normal," are central themes throughout *Muslim American Women on Campus*.

The book delves deeply into the Muslim American women's experiences in relation to alcohol and party culture, clothing and dress, and dating. Mir aptly explains that although these topics may seem to reinforce tropes about Muslim women, these were the most salient

considerations for her research participants, and thus needed to be the core of her analysis. She first addresses alcohol and drinking. As Mir notes in the chapter preceding her discussion of alcohol, hedonism and debauchery are central characteristics of collegiate campus life, and participation in or abstention from partying, drinking, and sexuality are crucial determinants of identity and belonging among undergraduate students. According to her interviewees, alcohol was the most significant obstacle Muslim nondrinkers had to overcome in order to be and feel “normal” on campus. Drinking alcohol constituted the core of collegiate social life on both campuses, and whether Muslim students chose to drink or not they faced repercussions both from within and from outside the Muslim community on each campus. The practice was associated with freedom, letting go of parental expectations and requirements, and with a kind of “crazy fun.” Deciding whether and when to drink or to spend time around drinkers, as well as whether to avoid alcohol entirely, were all potential choices selected by the women portrayed in the book.

In a poignant moment of analysis, Mir discusses how a non-drinker’s attempts to more gently and respectfully navigate interactions with drinkers were not met with mutually kind responses, and argues that the majority peers’ *tolerance* of this woman’s non-drinking did not match her *acceptance* of their choices [emphasis original] (Mir, 2014). This example epitomizes the complex, competing pressures Muslim undergraduate women faced regarding alcohol and drinking; it also frames the other practices and choices that influenced how Muslim and non-Muslim peers reacted to various decisions the interviewees made. Choices about whether or not to drink, and the exclusion from majority campus social life that followed, seemed for some students to be portents of future marginality. Any choice a Muslim woman made about drinking resulted in a liminal or invisible position in some community. The double bind of “fitting in” versus remaining adherent to normative Islam was demonstrable.

Dress was another prominent point of consideration for the women interviewed in *Muslim American Women on Campus*. For Muslim women, determining whether or not to wear *hijab* is a personal and a political choice. Both Muslims and non-Muslims made assumptions about women who wore *hijab*, and while the headscarf could facilitate conversations and education between *hijabi* women and non-Muslims, the presence of the *hijab* led to the enactment of barriers that the women then tried to break down. As Mir claims, “Hijab broke the ice that it helped create in the first place” (Mir, 2014, p. 91). Furthermore, wearing *hijab* made the Muslim women who chose it instantly visible, further transforming these particular Muslim women into first-responder representatives of Islam. This representative responsibility shifted certain Muslim women into the spotlight, while simultaneously highlighting the women who openly identified (or were read) as Muslim and did not choose to wear *hijab*. Again, the intersecting constraints on Muslim women’s choices were evident. Later in this chapter, Mir notes that American students’ inability to process or understand Muslim women’s “incessant border crossings” (Mir, 2014, p. 96) in the complexity of their behaviors and beliefs limited *hijabi* women’s abilities to enact flexibility in their lives. The women reacted to challenges to their identities in a variety of ways, from engaging in outspoken education to dodging conversations and explanations for their choices. Even for non-*hijabi* women, determining whether and how to dress modestly was a regular concern and was policed by both Muslims and non-Muslims in different ways. Furthermore, the extent to which certain forms of dress reinforced or challenged claims to normality – as well as whether normality was sought – remained an ongoing consideration for the Muslim women students. Dress, like choices about drinking, positioned the Muslim American women as cultural insiders or outsiders, shaping both their identities and their interactions with fellow Muslims and members of the non-Muslim campus majority.

Mir's final topical chapter addresses dating, courtship, and sexuality. For most undergraduate students, college represents their first experience living outside their parents' homes and beyond their parents' supervision. As such, experimenting with dating, relationships, and future commitments becomes both more feasible and more contentious. While Muslim views on premarital sex and dating do vary, within mainstream Islam, and certainly within more orthopractic Islam, sexual relationships outside the bounds of marriage are forbidden, or *haram*. To maintain appropriate sexual relations, interactions between unrelated Muslim men and women are regulated, and often restricted. These religious expectations posed a challenge to Muslim students seeking to explore their identities and desires, or to build platonic community, while in college. However, Muslim women's role, and especially *hijabi* Muslim women's role, as representatives and maintainers of Islam complicated approaches to mixed-gender interactions and dating because a woman's reputation and future could be affected by such behaviors. For many of the Muslim women Mir interviewed, dating had a different meaning than in the majority culture; dating could be non-sexual, and was often, though not always, geared toward determining the possibility of a long-term future together. To sexualize this process was to transgress Islamic mores. As Mir cleverly explains, "Real Muslims pseudo-dated, and pseudo-Muslims *really* dated" [emphasis original] (Mir, 2014, p. 140). Maintaining (perceived) Islamic boundaries for dating helped to establish Muslim women as both different (from the majority community) and familiar (to the mainstream Muslim community). Islamic norms for mixed-gender interaction were reinforced and contested by activities within the Muslim Student Associations on both campuses, but diversity of practice was still discernible. For the Muslim women students, dating served as another division both within the Muslim community – among Muslims who did date in some capacity and Muslims who did not – and between the Muslim and non-Muslim communities. Here again, Muslim women were constrained and judged by *someone* for whatever choices they made.

In the conclusion, Mir focuses on the women's navigation of religious identities, social integration into campus culture, campus policies, the challenges of promoting diversity and multiculturalism on campus, and developing responses to Orientalist and racist assumptions. For scholars of gender and religion, Mir's book offers powerful analysis of the processes and experiences by which intersecting identities are shaped, challenged, and adapted in the college campus environment. *Muslim American Women on Campus* provides crucial insight for higher education professors and administrators into the ways that navigating campus culture as a religious minority affects all aspects of collegiate life. Though all of Mir's topical chapters increase collective awareness of the realities of collegiate social life for religious students, Chapter 3, "I Didn't Want to Have That Outcast Belief about Alcohol: Walking the Tightrope of Alcohol in Campus Culture," offers particularly strong, nuanced analysis of the establishment and enactment of social life and expectations on college campuses. Consideration of the construction of social life, time, and space remains critical in higher education, especially for and in relation to religious adherents. For higher education professionals, the importance of rethinking both accommodation for religious students and of working to reshape the limited characteristics of "normal" campus culture is evident. This book makes a needed contribution to the scholarship on Muslims in America, especially as members of this increasingly visible group navigate institutions and seek to reconcile and live out intersecting identities.

Muslim American Women on Campus is a compelling book, and Mir deftly and approachably documents the complex ways that American Muslim undergraduate women construct identities both independently of, and in response to, pressures from multiple sources. However, the first two chapters are heavy on theoretical explanation and seem too focused on laying out all of the relevant theoretical underpinnings of her topical chapters. Mir's writing

most engages the reader when she discusses her data and analysis. Her ability to crystallize linguistically key moments of her study is sharp and memorable. While the setting of her analysis in campus social and leisure cultures highlights the complexity of navigating and enacting Muslim identity in the undergraduate years, further attention to the policy implications of these Muslim women's experiences would have strengthened the conclusion and provided a clearer point of entry for higher education professionals. The book illuminates the challenges of changing campus culture and the activities and behaviors it currently valorizes, but further discussion of this aspect of the research would have been welcome. Additionally, more explicit discussion of the competing socializing forces surrounding these Muslim women would have been beneficial. *Muslim American Women on Campus* aptly illustrates Jeffrey Jensen Arnett's theory of broad and narrow socialization; broad socialization encourages independent self-discovery, while narrow socialization encourages conformity to established norms (Arnett, 1995). Following the various women through their unique experiences, while well-integrated throughout the book, was difficult to keep track of at times, and more clearly tracing their stories and socializing experiences throughout the book would have been helpful.

The complexities and tensions of establishing identities as Muslim American women are richly documented throughout *Muslim American Women on Campus*. Mir highlights how Muslim women simultaneously respond to assertions of either essential Muslim identity or fundamentally deviant Muslim identity, and how the women both challenge and reinforce this essentialization. Her analysis echoes Diana Fuss' claim that we often assume "some essences are more *essential* than others" [emphasis original] (Fuss, 1989, p. 116). And yet, the Muslim women depicted in the book demonstrate agency, contradiction, and evolution throughout. Mir's discussions of how her participants simultaneously constructed religious, gendered, and sexualized identities and navigated social situations make a much-needed contribution to the literature on religion as intersectional identity. *Muslim American Women on Campus* richly contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how American Muslim women find self-definition in a constrained environment.

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About the Author

Ariel Sincoff-Yedid is a doctoral candidate in Gender Studies at Indiana University. She received prior academic training in Middle East Studies and gender, education, and international development. Her research focuses on how Arab Muslims learn and construct gender and sexuality. She previously conducted research on the topic in Beirut, Lebanon, and will conduct her dissertation research in New York City in 2015-2016.